

STATEMENT BY COMMISSIONER ROBERT L. BENNETT TO  
GOVERNORS INTERSTATE INDIAN COUNCIL  
TULSA, OKLAHOMA  
JUNE 10, 1966

I accepted the position of Commissioner because I have faith and confidence in the Indian people, their abilities, and capabilities.

I believe that it should be the basic premise of policy that we place high expectations on Indian people. We have not entirely accepted, as we have moved along in our development of programs, the leadership, the contributions, which I think Indian people can make and which are so necessary to their development.

We must eliminate, where it exists, paternalism and the stifling effects which it has on people. We need to eliminate attitudes of dependency which paternalism creates in the minds of Indian people. I believe that we need to reappraise our relationship with Indian people -- because there is a disturbing degree of failure expectancy among many of our young people which ranges from the Head Start program to the prevocational program in Seattle. There must be a reason why so many young Indian people enter these programs with this high degree of failure expectancy and parents of Indian children need to be concerned.

As I see it, we must bring about a real, genuine, partnership with Indian leadership. There is no question, at least in my mind,

that Indian leadership must be brought aboard to the fullest extent possible as we deal with their problems.

We in the Bureau of Indian Affairs need to talk about our changing role. The Bureau for many years has been the prime source of service and opportunity for Indian people. There are now many agencies in the field of service to all people and we need to examine the resources that are available and, as a part of our changing role, make these more readily available to Indian people than they have been in the past. The Bureau of Indian Affairs should not be a buffer for the Indian people. We need to bring all Indian people face-to-face with reality and with their friends and neighbors in local, State, and national government and the business community as you do in Oklahoma.

Many States need to assume more responsibility for their Indian populations because the responsibilities of these citizens rightfully belong to the State and local governments. States should not consider Indian people a total Federal responsibility.

States need to encourage the development of Indian resources and to recognize the special education needs of Indian youngsters. More than 2/3 of all the Indian children in the country are enrolled in public schools. States need to encourage Indians to participate in their political life and give time and attention to the general welfare of their Indian citizens.

The Federal Government has responsibilities towards Indians some of which should now be shifted to the States to aid the cause of Indian development.

The economy of every State will be strengthened as the Indians are helped to develop their human and natural resources to the maximum degree possible.

While there is much the Federal Government can and will do, bringing them into the mainstream of American life will depend more on the Indians themselves, the assistance and encouragement given by their neighbors and the State and local governments in equipping them for modern American life.

In our Federal system almost every function or service provided by government is a cooperative one involving every level of government to some degree. Whatever may be the trends in other areas, Federal responsibility will decrease and State increase as we succeed in moving the Indians into the mainstream.

Today in some States the most valuable tracts of land for development are owned by Indians. In some States the most valuable undeveloped

farm lands, the best stands of timber, and finest outdoor recreation sites are owned by Indian tribes. Development of these assets will be good for the Indians -- and good for the States.

During the past year we have sought special legislation to permit the long-term leasing of several Indian reservations which lie at the edges of major western communities. Such legislation, if enacted, would permit urban industrial development to take place on these large virgin tracts. There can be no doubt about the economic contribution of such development to the general welfare of the communities involved.

The development of these Indian resources will help the move into the State stream of commerce, that industrial development on Indian reservations means a bigger payroll for both Indians and non-Indians, and that Indians pay sales, gasoline, and excise taxes which are now the largest revenue sources of most States. So long as Indian reservation lands remain undeveloped, the Indians living on them will be dependent upon the Federal Government.

The quickest way to bring Indian reservations into a role which is fully contributory to the economic life of the surrounding area is to develop them.

Indian parents want to and deserve the best possible education for their children. To provide that quality education the States must recognize and provide for the special needs of the Indian children or they will continue to drop out or be pushed out before graduation. Here is an opportunity to assist the Indian people in a most meaningful manner.

The States today enjoy the greatest opportunity in history to recognize and to deal with these special educational needs. Public Law 89-10, providing aid for elementary and secondary education, is an act specifically designed for the special educational needs of disadvantaged youngsters in the American public school system. Some of the western States are receiving large sums of money under this act to provide for Indian youngsters who come from homes where the family income is less than \$2,000 per year. It is hoped that the public schools will develop educational programs specifically designed for their disadvantaged Indian children. The members of the Education staff of the BIA are eager to share with the public school districts the things which they have learned about the special educational needs of Indian youngsters and the means of satisfying those needs. Public Law 89-10 should provide the basis for a much closer relationship between the public and Federal schools which serve Indian youngsters.

In the area of economic development there are also Federal programs which point the way toward a greater assumption of responsibility, by States, for their Indian populations. The Economic Development Act established a means by which States can help Indians and others to develop their resources and to improve their economic lot. States should submit on their own initiative to the EDA programs primarily planned to assist an economically disadvantaged Indian population. Some reservations do qualify as depressed areas in their own right and from these reservations proposals have come which were Indian originated.

Somewhat the same situation prevails with respect to the Community Action Programs of the Office of Economic Opportunity. Wherever Indian reservations are entitled by law to submit their own Community Action Programs, they have done so. However, the small unorganized Indian communities, both on and off reservations, need to be included by State and local governments in their plans for Community Action Programs.

Through the Economic Opportunity Act, the Economic Development Act, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the States have been presented with golden opportunities to contribute to the educational and economic advancement of Indian populations, and I strongly urge you to respond to the opportunities and the challenges

involved, and to join with the Federal Government in reviewing the whole area of Indian need and the spectrum of possibilities which are at hand to alleviate Indian poverty and provide a happier and more dignified life for the first citizens of this land.

I believe we need to talk to Indian people about their assuming more responsibility for making decisions which affect their daily lives. I believe too that there is much that can be done within our administrative structure to provide the Indian people this opportunity. Some of our procedures and regulations and instructions in the manual need to be reviewed so that every opportunity is provided the Indian people to assume responsibility to make decisions and learn to live with them.

One of the problems which is going to receive immediate and serious attention is our relationship with Congress and with the members of the committees who have responsibility for both substantive legislation and also for appropriations to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This relationship needs to be improved and a great deal of my time and that of other people in Washington will be taken up with this very vital part of our responsibility.

One of the key figures in any Indian legislation is Congressman Carl Albert, Majority Leader of the House. Indian legislation is rated a high priority item with him because notwithstanding the responsibility of his congressional position he keeps in close personal touch with the Indian people. It was my pleasure to be in his home area this week and visit with some of the Choctaw and Chickasaw people, many of whom he knows personally having been raised with them. These people are fortunate in having a man of the caliber of Mr. Albert representing them in the Congress.

I believe that we can do much to improve our public image. And this is going to receive much attention in the future. We have a role to perform. I believe we can perform it effectively. I think the people throughout the country need to know some of the good things that we are doing. It is my hope that they learn it from us and from others as time goes on. I believe that we need to be particularly sensitive to these situations that will affect our relationship either at the State level or at the national level, whether it be with other agencies, State legislatures, or the Congress.

Reorganization of the Bureau is controlled to a large extent by its mission, trusteeship, and service responsibilities. The objectives of the present reorganization are:

1. Decision-making on a timely basis by streamlining the organization.
2. Sensitivity to forces which will have an impact on the lives of Indian people.
3. Flexibility to deal with situations on a project basis rather than on a strictly functional basis.
4. Philosophical consistency.
5. Upgrading the education and liaison activities.

I want you to feel that in the Bureau there will be a very welcome reception for any ideas and recommendations; that we will welcome hearing from you the Indian people when you feel a particular program or idea has merit, even though it may be in conflict with established policy and regulations. We can make exceptions to the regulations, we can waive requirements, if justified, and we can go to Congress and ask for legislation.

We are going to move. A right decision made too late, is no decision. We can't wait for perfection -- let's get the issues before the people. If the people like the decisions, fine -- if not, they can appeal. I am realist enough to know that mistakes will be made but there are going to be decisions made and there are going to be policies issued. I welcome you aboard.

I look to the future with hope and enthusiasm. The Indian people are ready to move. I am ready, and I hope you are too, because together we need to provide the leadership and create the environment by which Indian people of this land can emerge into the fullness of their great destiny.